

THE GREAT

ESCAPE!

**Two late goals
save Wanderers**

TRAILING 2-0 after only 17 minutes in Saturday's F.A. Cup 4th qualifying round tie at Croydon, Wycombe Wanderers pulled off one of the greatest escapes since Houdini to retain their interest in the competition.

Wanderers, outplayed for the first 20 minutes and totally out of sorts for the next 50, looked like heading for a dismal defeat with nothing going right for them at all. Then manager Brian Lee pulled off a master stroke. He gambled in pushing big centre half John Delaney up to the front line and brought on substitute Dave Bullock at centre back.

It worked like a charm.

Croydon, who had looked sound until the move, just couldn't shackle this new threat and were put under a fierce assault which eventually proved too much for them. A truly brilliant free kick by Tony Horseman put Wycombe in with a chance and then Dylan Evans clinched the draw with six minutes left.

But while every praise should be given to Wycombe for this first class come-back, which needed a good deal of character to perform, it must also be stated they were desperately poor in the first half. The two Croydon goals seemed to destroy their confidence. Wycombe always seemed to be second to the ball and nothing, absolutely nothing, would go right for them.

Croydon, meanwhile, were

thoroughly enjoying Wanderers' frustrations. They played at their own pace, flicked the ball around nicely and had all the hallmarks of an Isthmian League Division One side. Wycombe scarcely looked good enough for Division Two.

Croydon 2, Wycombe Wanderers 2 REPORT BY STUART EARP

On their first half performance, it is easy to see why Croydon are the only remaining unbeaten side in the league. They are a well organised outfit with an excellent defensive record of only five goals conceded in 13 matches. The back four looked sound while midfield ticked over nicely and the front runners showed skill and pace. The replay tonight will be no formality for the home side.

Wycombe made one surprise change to their side by bringing back Howard Kennedy in place of Dave Alexander in midfield.

Before the kick off a minute's silence was observed in memory of Mr. Jack Smethurst, the Wanderers chairman, who died on Friday evening. Both teams wore black armbands.

Croydon got off to a cracking start. Kelvin Roots went close and then Cliff Hall, the former Charlton winger, crashed a 20 yard drive onto the crossbar with John Maskell beaten. In the 11th minute, the home side's crisp, direct attacks brought their reward.

Fred Sterling split the Wycombe defence by chipping through to Cliff Gould. He took

the ball past Maskell and rolled it towards the net only for Paul Birdseye to palm the ball off the line. Referee Maher had no doubts and Roots drove home the penalty just past Maskell's outstretched fingers.

The early set-back unnerved

Wanderers at the back while the midfield trio were being beaten to the ball time and time again. Croydon's second goal, in the 17th minute, made matters even worse. The Blues could do little to prevent this one — a beautifully executed goal. Hall and Sterling combined well before the latter laid the ball off for Martin O'Toole to take a couple of steps forwards and crack past Maskell from 12 yards.

Wanderers could summon up very little in reply. Their passes were over-hit, players kept slipping on the greasy surface and they were often caught in possession. And when they did get in their first real effort for goal, they found themselves out of luck. Ray Eaton's long ball upfield was headed out by Hill. It fell straight at Horseman's feet and 'Bodger's' dipping volley looked a goal all the way until it struck the angle of bar and post and fell to safety.

If Wycombe were to get back into the game, they ideally needed a goal before the interval. Two fine saves by Dave Cobb denied them the chance. The first came in injury time when Kennedy, who worked hard in

midfield, sent in one of those all-too-rare long shots of his. Cobb did well to parry the effort which bounced out to Evans. Dylan swung in a shot but once again, Cobb got his body in the way to deflect the ball away. At the time, Horseman's volley that hit the woodwork and those two saves by Cobb, seemed to have ended Wycombe's chances there and then.

There was very little to change that view when the second half continued in the same style. Still the Blues persisted in playing the high ball upfield to Evans, who had a dismal time in the air. Throughout the team there was a distinct lack of challenge for the ball and the ultimate confusion came when a short free kick was taken outside the Croydon box. Reardon tried a quick tap to the bye-line but no-one anticipated the move and the ball rolled slowly over the line for a goal kick.

It was noticeable after the interval how Croydon's tactics changed. Instead of going forward in numbers as they did in the first half, they pulled an extra man back into defence and seemed prepared to hang onto their lead at all costs. The folly of those tactics has been proved time and time again — and Saturday was no exception. The defence had to sustain far more pressure and they lost the command over the Blues forwards.

Perhaps the Wanderers manager spotted Croydon's growing anxiety at the back or perhaps it was a last desperate gamble, to push Delaney into the front line. Geoff Anthony, unable to make any impact, came off in the 67th minute. Delaney's sheer physical presence was soon paying dividends. Hill and Robin Gonzales were beaten regularly by the new striker and the home side began to give away free kicks all too often. They paid the price from one of them in the 71st minute.

Delaney won the ball in the air to flick on to Evans but the Welshman was held back by the shirt just outside the home penalty area. The referee missed the offence but the linesman kept his flag raised — an important decision. Mr. Maher then awarded the free kick and despite being faced by a seven man wall, Horseman chipped the ball over them all and somehow bent it under the crossbar

Horseman had given Wycombe — and their supporters — hope at last. Before, it had looked hopeless. Now there was a definite chance of survival. Croydon began to feel the tension more and more. More free kicks, more corners and more pressure.

But with Wanderers pushing everything forward, they left themselves vulnerable to breakaways. Bernie Merron, a 72nd minute substitute for Gould, emphasised the danger when running 40 yards and crossing hard into the box with the Blues really stretched. Maskell did well to get a touch to the ball and steer it just out of O'Toole's reach.

The ball was immediately thumped downfield. Croydon brought everyone back inside their own half and massed their defences. Sheer weight of numbers foiled Wycombe until the 84th minute, when Kennedy crossed over from the right. After a scramble, Evans bundled the ball home at the far post to send the fans wild with delight.

But that wasn't the end of the excitement. In the last minutes of normal time (the referee added on four minutes at the end of each half for various stoppages), the woodwork saved Wycombe when Sterling hammered a magnificent 25 yard shot over Maskell's leap. 'Lady Luck' was certainly on Wanderers' side on that occasion but gave them full credit for their fighting come-back after such a disastrous first half.

CROYDON: D. Cobb; K. Roots, B. Gonzales, A. Hill, L. Setters; A. Prime, F. Sterling, B. Wootley; M. O'Toole, C. Gould (sub. B. Merron, 72 mins.).
WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, J. Delaney, R. Eaton; H. Kennedy, T. Reardon, M. Hoffield; A. Horseman, D. Evans, G. Anthony (sub. D. Bullock, 67 mins.).

Referee: T. Maher.
Half time: 2-0. **Goalscorers:** Croydon (Roots (11) pen., O'Toole (17)).
Wycombe — Horseman (71), Evans (84).
Official attendance: 1,200.